

## **November 5, 2017**

Mal 1:14b-2:2b,8-10; 1 Thes 2:7b-9,13; Mt 23:1-12

*Therefore, do and observe all things whatsoever they tell you, but do not follow their example. For they preach but they do not practice.* Suppose there was a person who wrote letters to the editor, and sent out messages and emails, and blogged day and night about the corruption and theft in government. Suppose also that this person posts photographs of checks they wrote to charitable causes and tells others they should do the same, causing them to get a lot of complementary responses. Then suppose you found out that this champion of honesty and defender of truth was found to be stealing from their work, and did many of the same corrupt practices that they railed about day and night. You'd be a little disillusioned. When we come face to face with a situation like that often our first response is to throw out the person - and also everything they said. What Jesus points out to us today is that there is the message and the messenger. The trick is to get the true message regardless of the quality of the messenger.

It's not the messenger that makes the message correct, it is the truth of the message itself. Jesus is speaking today about those who may say the right things, who know what they should do, yet don't do it - or those that may do the right things but only status and recognition. This is all of us at some times, by the way - which is why we have to continually examine ourselves and make corrections when we are not acting as we know we ought, or acting for the wrong motives. Jesus is criticizing those who can teach the right things but are hypocritical, and those who do the right things but just for show and not because of the right reasons. He calls us to look past the messenger of God's revelation to the message God is transmitting. When we have grasped that message, it is up to us to put it into practice - spreading it by our words and actions. In our second reading St. Paul gives credit to the Thessalonians for having done just that. For having recognized the truth being spoken and then having taken it to heart because of their faith and belief in God's word, he says: *And for this reason we too give thanks to God unceasingly, that, in receiving the word of God from hearing us, you received not a human word but, as it truly is, the word of God, which is now at work in you who believe.*

Jesus calls us to regard the message of our heavenly Father - and tells us we have one true Father in heaven. The father of us all who places requirements on us only out of justice (praising

God is what God is due in justice; serving those who are in pain, or marginalized, or badly treated, or needy brings them justice). God also requires things out of a love for us to bring us peace in this life and the joys of heaven in the next life. This is the Father that we are called to turn to, this is the Father that Jesus given us example in being faithful to, this is the Father we heard spoken of in the first reading: *Have we not all the one father? Has not the one God created us? Why then do we break faith with one another, violating the covenant of our fathers?*

But who are these “fathers” spoken of in this reading. Doesn’t this contradict Jesus’ statement to call no one on earth your father? Some people will assert that the title “father” that is given to priests of the Catholic, Episcopal, Orthodox, and other Christian traditions is a violation of scripture. But this reading of that line from the Gospel “call no one on earth your father” doesn’t take into account other passages of Scripture. For example in 1 Corinthians Paul says: *For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel.* In Acts 7:2 and Acts 22:1 human individuals are referred to as “fathers,” and Jesus himself in telling parables refers to humans as someone’s “father.” To think that Jesus does not want you to call that guy who married your mother your “father” but rather to use another word like “dad” instead misses the point. Jesus was meaning something deeper than just word usage. Jesus is criticizing those who set themselves up in the place of God - placing themselves as the One Father, the giver of truth, and forgetting that as spiritual “fathers” they only share in the fatherhood of that one true father - he was not just restricting the use of a word, but correcting an attitude. In the first reading the word “father” is used in more than one sense (for God, and for those leaders with whom God made the covenant) and this carried into Jesus’ message - we all have one Father in God, but have other spiritual “fathers” (as Paul calls himself) who pass the message of the one Father on to us. When we use the title "father" for a priest or our dad, it doesn’t confer upon them the same status proper to Our Heavenly Father, nor does it diminish God's absolute and universal fatherhood.

Regardless of the motives of the messenger, their title, or how well they live the message, we have to still hear that message of God our one true Father - sometimes transmitted to us through human and imperfect spiritual “fathers” - and live that message out of love and respect for that Heavenly Father - the Father who loves us and who alone gives us the message of truth.